

Resilience & Vulnerability: Adaptation in the Context of Childhood Adversities

Suniya S Luthar editor. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press; 2003. 574p. US \$32.00, paperback.

When one hears what people have gone through and are able to live good productive lives, I am left amazed that they have thrived and wonder how they were able to do it. So I looked forward to reviewing the book *Resilience and Vulnerability*, edited by Suniya Luthar, to see what light might be shed on my conundrum.

Much of my work is dealing with the aftermath of significant maltreatment when resilience has failed, leaving individuals vulnerable, not reaching their potential and with their development compromised. How to break the intergenerational transmission of pathology (maladaptation) is an individual challenge, and to help children already showing signs and symptoms of maladaptation to take a different healthier path and inform public practice so that policies are instituted that can aid children to reach their potential is a social challenge. We see so much that is tragic and ill advised. One wonders whether there is anything a mental health practitioner can do to prevent such tragedies? Hence, this book is timely, reviewing what is known on the subject to guide which path to transverse and which to ignore or pass by.

Resilience is not a trait, but a process. Cicchetti, in the introduction, defines it "as a dynamic developmental process reflecting evidence of positive adaptation despite significant life adversity."

The contributors were asked to address four themes or questions: a) To provide operational definitions of their chosen area of focus and the methods they used to investigate; b) To make clear what they see as the significant vulnerability and protective mechanisms; c) To articulate the limits of adaptation; d) To speak to the implications of their findings for intervention and policy development.

The book is divided into three parts following the preface or introduction. The first section of 8 chapters looks at familial adversities, parental psychopathology and familial processes. In the second section of 9 chapters the eco-systemic and socio-demographic risk factors are considered. The book concludes with three chapters that synthesize and comment on the field—what is known and what still needs to be researched and considered.

Risk factors co-exist with other risk factors and appear to be cumulative so that it is the multiplicity of disadvantages that appears to be toxic. Intelligence, problem-solving abilities, easy temperament, parental attachment/bonding and external interests and affiliation all act together to ameliorate adversity. Supportive personal relationships appear to be particularly important in protecting or supporting positive developmental processes. The more resources—warmth, clarity and involvement of primary care takers and the meanings attributed to events and community support—all interact supportively, the more there is positive development.

All the studies come back to the importance of sensitive and emotionally responsive and attuned primary caretakers with continuity of relationships. Unfortunately, those who need support the most seem to get less and communities don't bond together synergistically to provide it. Other forces seem, unfortunately, to be operant, which interfere with the provision of what is known for optimal development. The issue of effective intervention is complex. There is no magic bullet. Yet the studies suggest that community development and organization approaches do work. Unfortunately, these ways of working are often not available and public policy does not appear willing to support that which is known.

I wish there had been more in the book about the biological parameters which may reflect the newness of the work and its complexity. Genetics are important, but genes don't operate in just one way. Nature and nurture interact, but how to sort out the primary influence is still unclear. In the synthesis, it is suggested that to sort out the many strands of resiliency, researchers need to give clear definitions and explicate their methodologies. Standardized research design is important so that studies can be replicated to sort out the wheat from the chaff. There is need for a universal nomenclature so that all are considering the same definitions and phenomenology.

It is a rich book that brings together work from a variety of sources. It's clear that the final work is not yet in but there is enough light to set a direction and inform practice and policy. It's not a book to read cover to cover but I found the forward by Cicchetti and the last three chapters particularly valuable. I'm glad I had the opportunity to review this book and know it will inform my practice, particularly the consultation that I provide via interactive television to rural areas.

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